

On Christmas
Day in the
Evening

by
Grace
Richmond

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On Christmas Day in the Morning

Red Pepper Burns

A Court of Inquiry

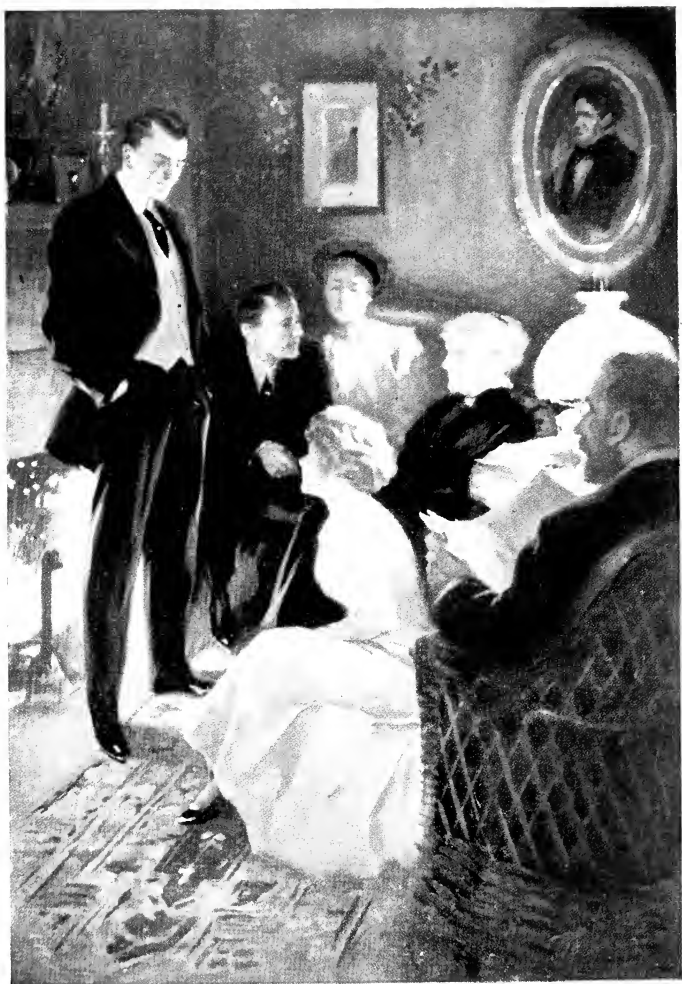
Round the Corner in Gay Street

With Juliet in England

The Indifference of Juliet

The Second Violin

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"IT'S A GOOD THING TO EXERCISE THE IMAGINATION, NOW AND THEN. THAT'S THE WAY CHANGES COME"

On
Christmas
Day In The
Evening

by
Grace S. Richmond

Illustrated by
Charles M. Relyea

Garden City New York
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1910

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ILLUSTRATIONS

“It’s a good thing to exercise the
imagination, now and then.
That’s the way changes come”

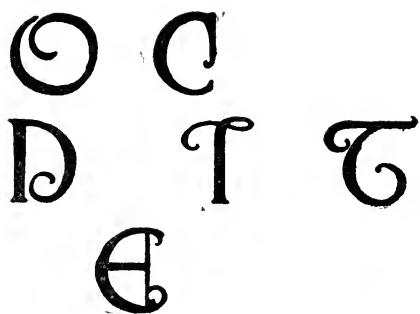
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Holy night! peaceful night! Darkness flies, all is light!

ALL the Fernald family go back to the old home for Christmas, now, every year. Last Christmas was the third on which Oliver and Edson, Ralph and Guy, Carolyn and Nan, were all at the familiar fireside, as they used to be in the days before they were married. The wives and husbands and children go too—when other family claims can

be compromised with — and no one of them, down to Carolyn's youngest baby, who was not a year old last Christmas, has sustained a particle of harm from the snowy journey to North Estabrook, tucked away though it is among the hills, where the drifts are deep.

Taking them all together they are quite a company. And as Father and Mother Fernald are getting rather well along in years, and such a house-party means a good deal of preparation, last year their younger daughter Nan, and her husband, Sam Burnett: and their youngest son, Guy, and his wife of a year, Margaret: went up to North Estabrook two days ahead of the rest, to help with the finishing labours. Sam Burnett and Guy Fernald, being busy young men all the year round, thought it great sport to get up into the country in the winter, and planned, for a fortnight beforehand, to be able to

manage this brief vacation. As for Nan and Margaret — they are always the best of friends. As for Father and Mother Fernald —

“I don’t know but this is the best part of the party,” mused John Fernald, looking from one to another of them, and then at his wife, as they sat together before the fireplace, on the evening of the arrival. “It was all over so quick, last year, and you were all piling back to town, to your offices, in such a hurry, you boys. Now we can have a spell of quiet talk, before the fun begins. That suits us to a T — eh, Mother?”

Mrs. Fernald nodded, smiling. Her hand, held fast in Guy’s, rested on his knee; Nan’s charming head, with its modish dressing, lay against her shoulder. What more could a mother ask? Across the fireplace, Sam Burnett, most satisfactory of sons-in-law, and Margaret, Guy’s best beloved, who had made the year

one long honeymoon to him — so he declared — completed the little circle.

There was much to talk about. To begin with, there was everybody in North Estabrook to inquire after; and though North Estabrook is but a very small village, it takes time to inquire after everybody. Quite suddenly, having asked solicitously concerning a very old woman, who had nursed most of the Fernald children in their infancy and was always remembered by them with affection, it occurred to Nan to put a question which had been on her mind ever since she had come into town on the afternoon stage.

“Speaking of Aunt Eliza, Mother, makes me think of the old church. She used to talk so much about liking to hear the bell ring, right up over her head, next door. *Does* the bell ever ring, these days — or have cobwebs grown over the clapper?”

A shadow dropped upon Mrs. Fernald's bright face, but before she could speak her husband answered for her. He was more than a little deaf, but he was listening closely, and he caught the question.

"It's a miserable shame, Nancy, but that church hasn't had a door open since a year ago last July, when the trouble burst out. We haven't had a service there since. Mother and I drive over to Estabrook when we feel like getting out — but that's not often, come winter-time. Being the only church building in this end of the township, it's pretty bad having it closed up. But there's the fuss. Folks can't agree what to do, and nobody dares get a preacher here and try to start things up, on their own responsibility. But we feel it — we sure do. I don't like to look at the old meeting-house, going by, I declare I don't. It looks lonesome to me. And there's where

every one of you children grew up, too, sitting there in the old family pew, with your legs dangling. It 's too bad — it 's too bad!"

"It 's barbarous!" Guy exclaimed, in a tone of disgust.

"And all over nothing of any real consequence," sighed Mrs. Fernald, in her gentle way. "We would have given up our ideas gladly, for the sake of harmony. But — there were so many who felt it necessary to fight to have their own way."

"And feel that way still, I suppose?" suggested Sam Burnett, cheerfully. "There 's a whole lot of that feeling-it-necessary-to-fight, in the world. I've experienced it myself, at times."

They talked about it for a few minutes, the younger men rather enjoying the details of the quarrel, as those may who are outside of an affair sufficiently far to see its inconsistencies and humours. But it

was clearly a subject which gave pain to the older people, and Guy, perceiving this, was about to divert the talk into pleasanter channels when Nan gave a little cry. Her eyes were fixed upon the fire, as if she saw there something startling.

“People! — Let’s open the church — ourselves — and have a Christmas Day service there!”

They stared at her for a moment, thinking her half dreaming. But her face was radiant with the light of an idea which was not an idle dream.

Guy began to laugh. “And expect the rival factions to come flocking peaceably in, like lambs to the fold? I think I see them!”

“Ignore the rival factions. Have a service for everybody. A real Christmas service, with holly, and ropes of greens, and a star, and music — and — a sermon,” she ended, a little more doubtfully.

“The sermon, by all means,” quoth

Sam Burnett. "Preach at 'em, when once you've caught 'em. They'll enjoy that. We all do."

"But it's really a beautiful idea," said Margaret, her young face catching the glow from Nan's. "I don't see why it couldn't be carried out."

"Of course you don't." Guy spoke decidedly. "If people were all like you there wouldn't be any quarrels. But unfortunately they are not. And when I think of the Tomlinsons and the Frasers and the Hills and the Pollocks, all going in at the same door for a Christmas Day service under that roof — well ——" he gave a soft, long whistle — "it rather strains my imagination. Not that they aren't all good people, you know. Oh, yes! If they weren't, they'd knock each other down in the street and have it over with — and a splendid thing it would be, too. But, I tell you, it strains my imagination to ——"

"Let it strain it. It's a good thing to exercise the imagination, now and then. That's the way changes come. I don't think the idea's such a bad one, myself." Sam Burnett spoke seriously, and Nan gave him a grateful glance. She was pretty sure of Sam's backing, in most reasonable things — and a substantial backing it was to have, too.

"Who would conduct such a service?" Mrs. Fernald asked thoughtfully.

"You couldn't get anybody out to church on Christmas morning," broke in Mr. Fernald, chuckling. "Every mother's daughter of 'em will be basting her Christmas turkey."

"Then have it Christmas evening. Why not? The day isn't over. Nobody knows what to do Christmas evening — except go to dances — and there's never a dance in North Estabrook. Whom can we get to lead it? Well ——" Nan paused, think-

ing it out. Her eyes roamed from Sam's to her father's, and from there on around the circle, while they all waited for her to have an inspiration. Nobody else had one. Presently, as they expected — for Nan was a resourceful young person — her face lighted up again. She gazed at Margaret, smiling, and her idea seemed to communicate itself to Guy's wife. Together they cried, in one breath:

“Billy!”

“Billy! Whoop-ee!” Guy threw back his head and roared with delight at the notion. “The Reverend Billy, of St. Johns, coming up to North Estabrook to take charge of a Christmas-evening service! Why, Billy'll be dining in purple and fine linen at the home of one of his millionaire parishioners — the Edgecombs', most likely. I think they adore him most. *Billy!* — Why don't you ask the Bishop himself?”

Margaret flushed brightly. The

Reverend William Sewall was her brother. He might be the very manly and dignified young rector of a fashionable city church, but no man who answers to the name of Billy in his own family can be a really formidable personage, and he and his sister Margaret were undeniably great chums.

"Of course Billy would," cried Margaret. "You know perfectly well he would, Guy, dear. He doesn't care a straw about millionaires' dinners — he'd rather have an evening with his newsboys' club, any time. He has his own service Christmas morning, of course, but in the evening — He could come up on the afternoon train — he'd love to. Why, Billy's a bachelor — he's nothing in the world to keep him. I'll telephone him, first thing in the morning."

From this point on there was no lack of enthusiasm. If Billy Sewall was coming to North Estabrook, as

Sam Burnett remarked, it was time to get interested — and busy. They discussed everything, excitement mounting — the music, the trimming of the church — then, more prosaically, the cleaning and warming and lighting of it. Finally, the making known to North Estabrook the news of the coming event — for nothing less than an event it was sure to be to North Estabrook.

“Put a notice in the post office,” advised Guy, comfortably crossing his legs and grinning at his father, “and tell Aunt Eliza and Miss Jane Pollock, and the thing is done. Sam, I think I see you spending the next two days at the top of ladders, hanging greens. I have a dim and hazy vision of you on your knees before that stove that always used to smoke when the wind was east — the one in the left corner — praying to it to quit fussing and draw. A nice, restful Christmas vacation you’ll have!”

Sam Burnett looked at his wife. "She's captain," said he. "If she wants to play with the old meeting-house, play she shall — so long as she doesn't ask me to preach the sermon."

"You old dear!" murmured Nan, jumping up to stand behind his chair, her two pretty arms encircling his stout neck from the rear. "You *could* preach a better sermon than lots of ministers, if you are only an upright old bank cashier."

"Doubtless, Nancy, doubtless," murmured Sam, pleasantly. "But as it will take the wisdom of a Solomon, the tact of a Paul, and the eloquence of the Almighty Himself to preach a sermon on the present occasion that will divert the Tomlinsons and the Frasers, the Hills and the Pollocks from glaring at each other across the pews, I don't think I'll apply for the job. Let Billy Sewall tackle it. There's one

thing about it — if they get to fighting in the aisles Billy'll leap down from the pulpit, roll up his sleeves, and pull the combatants apart. A virile religion is Billy's, and I rather think he's the man for the hour."

II

"Hi, there, Ol — why not get something doing with that hammer? Don't you see the edge of that pulpit stair-carpeting is all frazzled? The preacher'll catch his toes in it, and then where'll his ecclesiastical dignity be?"

The slave-driver was Guy, shouting down from the top of a tall step-ladder, where he was busy screwing into place the freshly cleaned oil-lamps whose radiance was to be depended upon to illumine the ancient interior of the North Estabrook church. He addressed his eldest

brother, Oliver, who, in his newness to the situation and his consequent lack of sympathy with the occasion, was proving but an indifferent worker. This may have been partly due to the influence of Oliver's wife, Marian, who, sitting — in Russian sables — in one of the middle pews, was doing what she could to depress the labourers. The number of these, by the way, had been reinforced by the arrival of the entire Fernald clan, to spend Christmas.

"Your motive is undoubtedly a good one," Mrs. Oliver conceded. She spoke to Nan, busy near her, and she gazed critically about the shabby old walls, now rapidly assuming a quite different aspect as the great ropes of laurel leaves swung into place under the direction of Sam Burnett. That young man now had Edson Fernald and Charles Wetmore — Carolyn's husband — to assist him, and he was making the

most of his opportunity to order about two gentlemen who had shown considerable reluctance to remove their coats, but who were now — to his satisfaction — perspiring so freely that they had some time since reached the point of casting aside still other articles of apparel. “But I shall be much surprised,” Mrs. Oliver continued, “if you attain your object. Nobody can be more obstinate in their prejudice than the people of such a little place as this. You may get them out — though I doubt even that — but you are quite as likely as not to set them by the ears and simply make matters worse.”

“It’s Christmas,” replied Nan. Her cheeks were the colour of the holly berries in the great wreaths she was arranging to place on either side of the wall behind the pulpit. “They can’t quarrel at Christmas — not with Billy Sewall preaching peace on earth, good will to men, to them.—

Jessica, please hand me that wire — and come and hold this wreath a minute, will you?"

"Nobody expects Marian to be on any side but the other one," consolingly whispered merry-faced Jessica, Edson's wife — lucky fellow! — as she held the wreath for Nan to affix the wire.

"What's that about Sewall?" Oliver inquired. "I hadn't heard of that. You don't mean to say Sewell's coming up for this service?"

"Of course he is. Margaret telephoned him this morning, and he said he'd never had a Christmas present equal to this one. He said it interested him a lot more than his morning service in town, and he'd be up, loaded. Isn't that fine of Billy?" Nan beamed triumphantly at her oldest brother, over her holly wreath.

"That puts a different light on it." And Mr. Oliver Fernald, president

of the great city bank of which Sam Burnett was cashier, got promptly down on the knees of his freshly pressed trousers, and proceeded to tack the frazzled edge of the pulpit stair-carpet with interest and skill. That stair-carpet had been tacked by a good many people before him, but doubtless it had never been stretched into place by a man whose eye-glasses sat astride of a nose of the impressive, presidential mould of this one.

“Do I understand that you mean to attempt music?” Mrs. Oliver seemed grieved at the thought. “There are several good voices in the family, of course, but you haven’t had time to practise any Christmas music together. You will have merely to sing hymns.”

“Fortunately, some of the old hymns are Christmas music, of the most exquisite sort,” began Nan, trying hard to keep her temper — a

feat which was apt to give her trouble when Marian was about. But, at the moment, as if to help her, up in the old organ-loft, at the back of the church, Margaret began to sing. Everybody looked up in delight, for Margaret's voice was the pride of the family, and with reason. Somebody was at the organ — the little reed organ. It proved to be Carolyn — Mrs. Charles Wetmore. For a moment the notes rose harmoniously. Then came an interval — and the organ wailed. There was a shout of protest, from the top of Guy's step-ladder:

“Cut it out — cut out the steam calliope! — unless you want a burlesque. That organ hasn't been tuned since the deluge — and they didn't get all the water out then.”

“I won't hit that key again,” called Carolyn. “Listen, you people.”

“Listen! You can't help listen-

ing when a cat yowls on the back fence," retorted Guy. "Go it alone, Margaret, girl."

But the next instant nobody was jeering, for Margaret's voice had never seemed sweeter than from the old choir-loft.

*"Over the hills of Bethlehem,
Lighted by a star,
Wise men came with offerings,
From the East afar. . . ."*

It took them all, working until late on Christmas Eve, to do all that needed to be done. Once their interest was aroused, nothing short of the best possible would content them. But when, at last, Nan and Sam, lingering behind the others, promising to see that the fires were safe, stood together at the back of the church for a final survey, they felt that their work had been well worth while. All the lights were out but one on either side, and the dim interior, with its ropes and wreaths of



"CUT IT OUT—CUT OUT THE STEAM CALLIOPE!"

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green, fragrant with the woodsy smell which veiled the musty one inevitable in a place so long closed, seemed to have grown beautiful with a touch other than that of human hands.

"Don't you believe, Sammy," questioned Nan, with her tired cheek against her husband's broad shoulder, "the poor old 'meeting-house' is happier to-night than it has been for a long, long while?"

"I think I should be," returned Sam Burnett, falling in with his wife's mood, "if after a year and a half of cold starvation somebody had suddenly warmed me and fed me and made me hold up my head again. It does look pretty well — much better than I should have thought it could, when I first saw it in its barrenness. — I wonder what the North Estabrook people are thinking about this — that's what I wonder. Do you suppose the Tomlinsons and the

Pollocks and the rest of them have talked about anything else to-day?"

"Not much else." Nan smiled contentedly. Then suddenly: "O Sam — the presents aren't all tied up! We must hurry back. This is the first Christmas Eve I can remember when the rattling of tissue paper wasn't the chief sound on the air."

"If this thing goes off all right," mused Burnett, as he examined the stoves once more, before putting out the lights, "it'll be the biggest Christmas present North Estabrook ever had. Peace and good will — Jove, but they need it! And so do we all — so do we all."

III

"There go pretty near every one of the Fernalds, down to the station. Land, but there's a lot of 'em, counting the children. I suppose they're

going to meet Guy's wife's brother, that they've got up here to lead these Christmas doings to-night. Queer idea, it strikes me."

Miss Jane Pollock, ensconced behind the thick "lace curtains" of her "best parlour," addressed her sister, who lay on the couch in the sitting-room behind, an invalid who could seldom get out, but to whom Miss Jane was accustomed faithfully to report every particle of current news.

"I suppose they think," Miss Jane went on, with asperity, "they're going to fix up the fuss in that church, with their greens and their city minister preaching brotherly love. I can tell him he'll have to preach a pretty powerful sermon to reach old George Tomlinson and Asa Fraser, and make 'em notice each other as they pass by. And when I see Maria Hill coming toward me with a smile on her face and her hand out I'll know something's happened."

"I don't suppose," said the invalid sister rather timidly, from her couch, "you would feel, Sister, as if you could put out your hand to her first?"

"No, I don't," retorted Miss Jane, very positively. "And I don't see how you can think it, Deborah. You know perfectly well it was Maria Hill that started the whole thing — and then talked about me as if I was the one. How that woman did talk — and talks yet! Don't get me thinking about it. It's Christmas Day, and I want to keep my mind off such disgraceful things as church quarrels — if the Fernald family'll let me. A pretty bold thing to do, I call it — open up that church on their own responsibility, and expect folks to come, and forget the past. — Debby, I wish you could see Oliver's wife, in those furs of hers. She holds her head as high as ever — but she's the only one of 'em that does it disagreeably — I'll say that for

'em, if they *are* all city folks now. And of course she isn't a Fernald.— Here comes Nancy and her husband. That girl don't look a minute older'n when she was married, five years ago. My, but she's got a lot of style! I must say her skirts don't hang like any North Estabrook dressmaker can make 'em. They're walking — hurrying up to catch the rest. Sam Burnett's a good-looking man, but he's getting a little stout."

"Jane," said the invalid sister, wistfully, "I wish I could go to-night."

"Well, I wish you could. That is — if I go. I haven't just made up my mind. I wonder if folks'll sit in their old pews. You know the Hills' is just in front of ours. But as to your going, Deborah, of course that's out of the question. I suppose I shall go. I shouldn't like to offend the Fernalds, and they do say Guy's wife's brother is worth hearing. There's to be music, too."

"I wish I could go," sighed poor Deborah, under her breath. "To be able to go — and to wonder whether you will! — *O Lord —*" she closed her patient eyes and whispered it — "*make them all choose to go — to Thy house — this Christmas Day. And to thank Thee that the doors are open — and that they have strength to go. And help me to bear it — to stay home!*"

IV

"The problem is —" said the Reverend William Sewall, standing at the back of the church with his sister Margaret, and Guy Fernald, her husband, and Nan and Sam Burnett — the four who had, as yet, no children, and so could best take time, on Christmas afternoon, to make the final arrangements for the evening — "the problem is — to do the right thing, to-night. It would

be so mighty easy to do the wrong one. Am I the only man to stand in that pulpit — and is it all up to me?"

He regarded the pulpit as he spoke, richly hung with Christmas greens and seeming eagerly to invite an occupant.

"I should say," observed his brother-in-law, Guy, his face full of affection and esteem for the very admirable figure of a young man who stood before him, "that a fellow who's just pulled off the sort of service we know you had at St. John's this morning, wouldn't consider this one much of a stunt."

Sewall smiled. "Somehow this strikes me as the bigger one," said he. "The wisest of my old professors used to say that the further you got into the country the less it mattered about your clothes but the more about your sermon. I've been wondering, all the way up, if I knew enough to preach that sermon. Isn't there any minister in town, not even a visiting one?"

"Not a one. You can't get out of it, Billy Sewall, if you have got an attack of stage-fright — which we don't believe."

"There *is* one minister," Nan admitted. "But I'd forgotten all about him, till Father mentioned him last night. But he doesn't really count at all. He's old — very old — and infirm."

"Superannuated, they call it," added Sam Burnett. "Poor old chap. I've seen him — I met him at the post-office this morning. He has a peaceful face. He's a good man. He must have been a strong one — in his time."

"Had he anything to do with the church trouble?" Sewall demanded, his keen brown eyes eager.

Nan and Guy laughed.

"Old 'Elder Blake'? — not except as he was on his knees, alone at home, praying for the fighters — both sides," was Guy's explanation. "So Father

says, and nobody knows better what side people were on."

"If I can get hold of a man whose part in the quarrel was praying for both sides, I'm off to find him," said Sewall, decidedly. He picked up his hat as he spoke. "Tell me where he lives, please."

"Billy!" His sister Margaret's voice was anxious. "Are you sure you'd better? Perhaps it would be kind to ask him to make a prayer. But you won't ——"

"You won't ask him to preach the sermon, Billy Sewall — promise us that," cried Guy. "An old man in his dotage!"

Sewall smiled again, starting toward the door. Somehow he did not look like the sort of fellow who could be easily swayed from an intention once he had formed it — or be forced to make promises until he was ready. "You've got me up here," said he, "now you'll have to take the con-

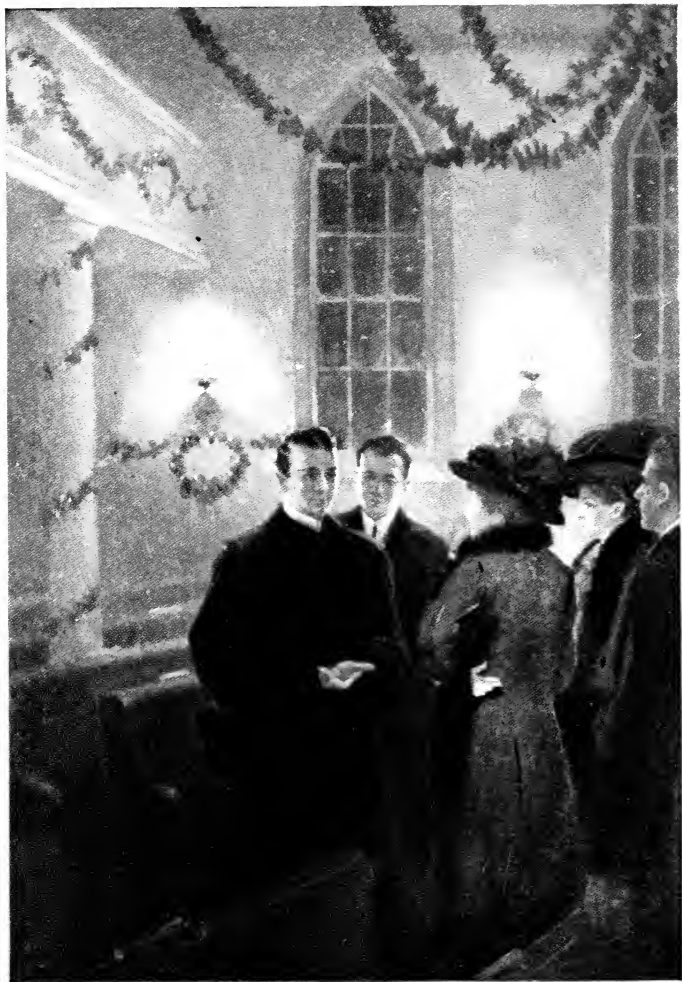
sequences. Where did you say 'Elder Blake' lives?"

And he departed. Those left behind stared at one another, in dismay.

"Keep cool," advised Sam Burnett. "He wants the old man's advice — that's all. I don't blame him. He wants to understand the situation thoroughly. Nothing like putting your head into a thing before you put your foot in. It saves complications. Sewall's head's level — trust him."

V

"I can't —" said a very old man with a peaceful face — now wearing a somewhat startled expression — "I can't quite believe you are serious, Mr. Sewall. The people are all expecting you — they will come out to hear you. I have not preached for —" he hesitated — "for many years. I will not say that it would not be —"



"BILLY!" HIS SISTER MARGARET'S VOICE WAS ANXIOUS. "ARE YOU SURE YOU'D BETTER?"

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a happiness. If I thought I were fit.
But ——”

“If I were half as fit,” answered Sewall, gently, “I should be very proud. But I’m — why, I’m barely seasoned, yet. I’m liable to warp, if I’m exposed to the weather. But you — with all the benefit of your long experience — you’re the sort of timber that needs to be built into this strange Christmas service. I hadn’t thought much about it, Mr. Blake, till I was on my way here. I accepted the invitation too readily. But when I did begin to think, I felt the need of help. I believe you can give it. It’s a critical situation. You know these people, root and branch. I may say the wrong thing. You will know how to say the right one.”

“If I should consent,” the other man said, after a silence during which, with bent white head, he studied the matter, “what would be your part? Should you attempt

—” he glanced at the clerical dress of his caller — “to carry through the service of your — Church?”

Sewall’s face, which had been grave, relaxed. “No, Mr. Blake,” said he. “It wouldn’t be possible, and it wouldn’t be — suitable. This is a community which would probably prefer any other service, and it should have its preference respected. A simple form, as nearly as possible like what it has been used to, will be best — don’t you think so? I believe there is to be considerable music. I will read the Story of the Birth, and will try to make a prayer. The rest I will leave to you.”

“And Him,” added the old man.

“And Him,” agreed the young man, reverently. Then a bright smile broke over his face, and he held out his hand. “I’m no end grateful to you, sir,” he said, a certain attractive boyishness of manner suddenly coming uppermost and putting

to flight the dignity which was at times a heavier weight than he could carry. "No end. Don't you remember how it used to be, when you first went into the work, and tackled a job now and then that seemed too big for you? Then you caught sight of a pair of shoulders that looked to you broader than yours — the muscles developed by years of exercise — and you were pretty thankful to shift the load on to them? You didn't want to shirk — Heaven forbid! — but you just felt you didn't know enough to deal with the situation. Don't you remember?"

The old man, with a gently humorous look, glanced down at his own thin, bent shoulders, then at the stalwart ones which towered above him.

"You speak metaphorically, my dear lad," he said quaintly, with a kindly twinkle in his faded blue eyes. He laid his left hand on the firm young arm whose hand held his shrunken

right. "But I do remember — yes, yes — I remember plainly enough. And though it seems to me now as if the strength were all with the young and vigorous in body, it may be that I should be glad of the years that have brought me experience."

"And tolerance," added William Sewall, pressing the hand, his eyes held fast by Elder Blake's.

"And love," yet added the other. "Love. That's the great thing—that's the great thing. I do love this community—these dear people. They are good people at heart — only misled as to what is worth standing out for. I would see them at peace. Maybe I can speak to them. God knows—I will try."

VI

"The Fernald family alone will fill the church," observed the bachelor son of the house, Ralph. He leaned

out from his place at the tail of the procession to look ahead down the line, where the dark figures showed clearly against the snow. By either hand he held a child — his sister Carolyn's oldest, his brother Edson's youngest. "So it won't matter much if nobody else comes out. We're all here — 'some in rags, and some in tags, and some in velvet gowns'."

"I can discern the velvet gowns," conceded Edson, from his place just in front, where his substantial figure supported his mother's frail one. "But I fail to make out any rags. Take us by and large, we seem to put up rather a prosperous front. I never noticed it quite so decidedly as this year."

"There's nothing at all ostentatious about the girls' dressing, dear," said his mother's voice in his ear. "And I noticed they all put on their simplest clothes for to-night — as they should."

“Oh, yes,” Edson chuckled. “That’s precisely why they look so prosperous. That elegant simplicity — gad! — you should see the bills that come in for it. Jess isn’t an extravagant dresser, as women go — not by a long shot — *but!*” He whistled a bar or two of rag-time. “I can see myself now, as a lad, sitting on that fence over there —” he indicated a line of rails, half buried in snow, which outlined the borders of an old apple orchard — “counting the quarters in my trousers pockets, earned by hard labour in the strawberry patch. I thought it quite a sum, but it wouldn’t have bought _____,”

“A box of the cigars you smoke now,” interjected Ralph unexpectedly, from behind. “Hullo — there’s the church! Jolly, but the old building looks bright, doesn’t it? I didn’t know oil lamps could put up such

an illumination. — And see the folks going in!”

“See them coming — from all directions.” Nan, farther down the line, clutched Sam Burnett’s arm. “Oh, I knew they’d come out — I knew they would!”

“Of course they’ll come out.” This was Mrs. Oliver. “Locks and bars couldn’t keep a country community at home, when there is anything going on. But as to the *feeling* — that is a different matter. — Oliver, do take my muff. I want to take off my veil. There will be no chance once I am inside the door. Nan is walking twice as fast now as when we started. She will have us all up the aisle before ——”

“Where’s Billy Sewall bolting to?” Guy sent back this stage-whisper from the front of the procession, to Margaret, his wife, who was walking with Father Fernald, her hand on his gallant arm. In John Fernald’s

day a man always offered his arm to the lady he escorted.

"He caught sight of Mr. Blake, across the road. They're going in together," Margaret replied. "I think Mr. Blake is to have a part in the service."

"Old Ebenezer Blake? You don't say!" Father Fernald ejaculated in astonishment. He had not been told of Sewall's visit to the aged minister. "Well — well — that is thoughtful of William Sewall. I don't suppose Elder Blake has taken part in a service in fifteen years — twenty, maybe. He used to be a great preacher, too, in his day. I used to listen to him, when I was a young man, and think he could put things in about as interesting a way as any preacher I ever heard. Good man, too, he was — and is. But nobody's thought of asking him to make a prayer in public since — I don't know when.

— Well, well — look at the people going in! I guess we'd better be getting right along to our seats, or there won't be any left."

VII

The organ was playing — very softly. Carolyn was a skilful manipulator of keyboards, and she had discovered that by carefully refraining from the use of certain keys — discreetly marked by postage stamps — she could produce a not unmusical effect of subdued harmony. This unquestionably added very much to the impression of a churchly atmosphere, carried out to the eye by the Christmas wreathing and twining of the heavy ropes of shining laurel leaves, and by the massing of the whole pulpit-front in the soft, dark green of hemlock boughs and holly. To the people who entered the

house with vivid memories of the burning July day when words hardly less burning had seemed to scorch the barren walls, this lamp-lit interior, clothed with the garments of the woods and fragrant with their breath, seemed a place so different that it could hardly be the same.

But the faces were the same — the faces. And George Tomlinson did not look at Asa Fraser, though he passed him in the aisle, beard to beard. Miss Jane Pollock stared hard at the back of Mrs. Maria Hill's bonnet, in the pew in front of her, but when Mrs. Hill turned about to glance up at the organ-loft, to discover who was there, Miss Pollock's face became as adamant, and her eyes remained fixed on her folded hands until Mrs. Hill had twisted about again, and there was no danger of their glances encountering. All over the church, like-

wise, were people who avoided seeing each other, though conscious, all down their rigid backbones, that those with whom they had fallen out on that unhappy July day were present.

There was no vestry in the old meeting-house; no retiring place of any sort where the presiding minister might stay until the moment came for him to make his quiet and impressive entrance through a softly opening pulpit door. So when the Reverend William Sewall of St. John's, of the neighbouring city, came into the North Estabrook sanctuary, it was as his congregation had entered, through the front door and up the aisle.

There was a turning of heads to see him come, but there was a staring of eyes, indeed, when it was seen by whom he was accompanied. The erect figure of the young man, in his unexceptionable attire, walked slowly,

to keep pace with the feeble footsteps of the very old man in his threadbare garments of the cut of half a century ago, and the sight of the two together was one of the most strangely touching things that had ever met the eyes of the people of North Estabrook. It may be said, therefore, that from that first moment there was an unexpected and unreckoned-with influence abroad in the place.

Now, to the subdued notes of the organ, which had been occupied with one theme, built upon with varying harmonies but ever appearing — though perhaps no ear but a trained one would have recognized it through the veil — was added the breath of voices. It was only an old Christmas carol, the music that of a German folk song, but dear to generations of Christmas singers everywhere. The North Estabrook people recognized it — yet did not recognize it. They

had never heard it sung like that before.

*"Holy night! peaceful night!
All is dark, save the light
Yonder where they sweet vigils keep
O'er the Babe, who in silent sleep
Rests in heavenly peace."*

It was the presence of Margaret Sewall Fernald which had made it possible to attempt music at this service — the music which it seemed impossible to do without. Her voice was one of rare beauty, her leadership that of training. Her husband, Guy, possessed a reliable, if uncultivated, bass. Edson had sung a fair tenor in his college glee-club. By the use of all her arts of persuasion Nan had provided an alto singer, from the ranks of the choir which had once occupied this organ-loft — the daughter of Asa Fraser. Whether the quartette thus formed would have passed muster — as a quartette — with the choir-master of St. John's,

may have been a question, but it is certain the music they produced was so far above that which the old church had ever heard before within its walls that had the singers been a detachment from the choir celestial those who heard them could hardly have listened with ears more charmed.

As "Holy Night" came down to him, William Sewall bent his head. But Ebenezer Blake lifted his. His dim blue eyes looked up — up and up — quite through the old meeting-house roof — to the starry skies where it seemed to him angels sang again. He forgot the people assembled in front of him — he forgot the responsibilities upon his shoulders — those bent shoulders which had long ago laid down such responsibilities. He saw visions. It is the old men who see visions. The young men dream dreams.

The young city rector read the Christmas Story — out of the worn

copy of the Scriptures which had served this pulpit almost from the beginning. He read it in the rich and cultivated voice of his training, but quite simply. Then Margaret sang, to the slender accompaniment of the little organ, the same solo which a famous soprano had sung that morning at the service at St. John's—and her brother William, listening from the pulpit, thought she sang it better. There was the quality in Margaret's voice which reaches hearts—a quality which somehow the famous soprano's notes had lacked. And every word could be heard, too—the quiet throughout the house was so absolute—except when Asa Fraser cleared his throat loudly in the midst of one of the singer's most beautiful notes. At the sound Mrs. George Tomlinson gave him a glance which ought to have annihilated him—but it did not. She could not know that the throat-clearing was a high tribute

to the song — coming from Asa
Fraser.

*“How silently, how silently,
The wondrous gift is given;
So God imparts to human hearts
The blessing of His heaven. . . .
O Holy Child of Bethlehem!
Descend to us, we pray;
Cast out our sin, and enter in,
Be born in us to-day.”*

Then William Sewall made a prayer. Those who had been looking to see old Elder Blake take this part in the service began to wonder if he had been asked into the pulpit simply as a courtesy. They supposed he could pray, at least. They knew he had never ceased doing it — and for them. Elder Blake had not an enemy in the village. It seemed strange that he couldn't be given some part, in spite of his extreme age. To be sure, it was many years since anybody had asked him to take part in any service whatsoever, even a funeral service — for which, as is well

understood, a man retains efficiency long after he has ceased to be of use in the pulpit, no matter how devastating may be the weather. But that fact did not seem to bear upon the present situation.

A number of people, among them Miss Jane Pollock, were beginning to feel more than a little indignant about it, and so lost the most of Sewall's prayer, which was a good one, and not out of the prayer-book, though there were phrases in it which suggested that source, as was quite natural. The city man meant to do it all, then. Doubtless he thought nobody from the country knew how to do more than to pronounce the benediction. Doubtless that was to be Elder Blake's insignificant part — to pronounce the —

Miss Jane Pollock looked up quickly. She had been staring steadily at the back of Maria Hill's

mink collar, in front of her, through the closing sentences of the prayer. But what was this? Elder Blake had risen and was coming forward. Was he going to read a hymn? But he had no book. And he had taken off his spectacles. He could see better, as was known, without his spectacles, when looking at a distance.

William Sewall's prayer was not ended. He could no longer be heard by the people, but in his seat, behind the drooping figure of the old man, he was asking things of the Lord as it seemed to him he had never asked anything before. Could His poor, feeble, "superannuated" old servant ever speak the message that needed to be spoken that night? William Sewall felt more than ever that he himself could not have done it. Could Ebenezer Blake?

"Make him strong, O God, — make

him strong," requested William Sewall, fervently. Then, forgetting even a likeness to prayer-book phrase, he added, with fists unconsciously tight-clenched, in the language of the athletic field where a few years back he himself had taken part in many a hard-fought battle — "*Help him to buck up!*"

VIII

They talk about it yet, in North Estabrook, though it happened a year ago. Nobody knew how it was that from a frail old man with a trembling voice, which, in its first sentences, the people back of the middle of the church could hardly hear, there came to stand before them a fiery messenger from the skies. But such was the miracle — for it seemed no less. The bent figure straightened, the trembling

voice grew clear and strong, the dim eyes brightened, into the withered cheeks flowed colour — into the whole aged personality came slowly but surely back the fires of youth. And once more in a public place Ebenezer Blake became the mouthpiece of the Master he served.

Peace and good will? Oh, yes — he preached it — no doubt of that. But it was no milk-and-water peace, no sugar-and-spice good will. There was flesh and blood in the message he gave them, and it was the message they needed. Even his text was not the gentle part of the Christmas prophecy, it was the militant part — “*And the government shall be upon His shoulder.*” They were not bidden to lie down together like lambs, they were summoned to march together like lions — the lions of the Lord. As William Sewall looked down into the faces of the people and watched the changing expressions there, he felt



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that the strange, strong, challenging words were going home. He saw stooping shoulders straighten even as the preacher's had straightened; he saw heads come up, and eyes grow light; — most of all, he saw that at last the people had forgotten one another and were remembering — God.

Suddenly the sermon ended. As preachers of a later day have learned the art of stopping abruptly with a striking climax, so this preacher from an earlier generation, his message delivered, ceased to speak. He left his hearers breathless. But after a moment's pause, during which the silence was a thing to be felt, the voice spoke again. It no longer rang — it sank into a low pleading, in words out of the Book upon which the clasped old hands rested:

“Now, therefore, O our God, hear the prayer of Thy servant and his

*supplications, and cause Thy face
to shine upon Thy sanctuary that is
desolate, for the Lord's sake."*

IX

Up in the choir-loft, chokily Guy whispered to Margaret, "Can't we end with 'Holy Night,' again? Nothing else seems to fit, after that."

She nodded, her eyes wet. It had not been thought best to ask the congregation to sing. There was no knowing whether anybody would sing if they were asked. Now, it seemed fortunate that it had been so arranged, for somehow the congregation did not look exactly as if it could sing. Certainly not George Tomlinson, for he had a large frog in his throat. Not Asa Fraser, for he had a furious cold in his head. Not Maria Hill, for though she hunted vigorously, high and low, for her handkerchief,

she was unable to locate it, and the front of her best black silk was rapidly becoming shiny in spots — a fact calculated to upset anybody's singing. Not even Miss Jane Pollock, for though no tears bedewed her bright black eyes, there was a peculiar heaving quality in her breathing, which suggested an impediment of some sort not to be readily overcome. And it may be safely said that there was not a baker's dozen of people left in the church who could have carried through the most familiar hymn without breaking down.

So the four in the organ loft sang "Holy Night" again. They could not have done a better thing. It is a holy night, indeed, when a messenger from heaven comes down to this world of ours, though he take the form of an old, old man with a peaceful face — but with eyes which can flash once more with a light which is not of earth, and with lips upon

which, for one last mighty effort, has been laid a coal from off the altar of the great High Priest.

*"Silent Night! Holy night!
Darkness flies, all is light!
Shepherds hear the angels sing —
Hallelujah! hail the king!
Jesus Christ is here!"*

X

George Tomlinson came heavily out of his pew. He had at last succeeded in getting rid of the frog in his throat — or thought he had. It had occurred to him that perhaps he ought to go up and speak to Elder Blake — now sitting quietly in his chair, with William Sewall bending over him — though he didn't know exactly what to say that would seem adequate to the occasion.

At the same moment, Asa Fraser, still struggling with the cold in his head, emerged from his pew, directly

opposite. The two men did not look at each other. But as they had been accustomed to allow their meeting glances to clash with the cutting quality of implacable resentment, this dropping of the eyes on the part of each might have been interpreted to register a distinct advance toward peace.

As each stood momentarily at the opening of his pew, neither quite determined whether to turn his face pulpitward or doorward, Samuel Burnett, coming eagerly up to them from the doorward side, laid a friendly hand on either black-clad arm. Whether Sam was inspired by Heaven, or only by his own strong common-sense and knowledge of men, will never be known. But he had been a popular man in North Estabrook, ever since he had first begun to come there to see Nancy Fernald, and both Tomlinson and Fraser heartily liked and respected him — a fact he understood and was counting on now.

“Wasn’t it great, Mr. Tomlinson?” said Sam, enthusiastically. “Great — Mr. Fraser?” He looked, smiling, into first one austere face and then the other. Then he gazed straight ahead of him, up at Elder Blake. “Going up to tell him so? So am I!” He pressed the two arms, continuing in his friendly way to retain his hold on both. “In all the years I’ve gone to church, I’ve never heard preaching like that. It warmed up my heart till I thought it would burst — and it made me want to go to work.”

Almost without their own volition Tomlinson and Fraser found themselves proceeding toward the pulpit — yet Sam’s hands did not seem to be exerting any force. The force came from his own vigorous personality, which was one that invariably inspired confidence. If Burnett was going up to speak to the Elder, it seemed only proper that they, the

leading men of the church, should go too.

William Sewall, having assured himself that his venerable associate was not suffering from a more than natural exhaustion after his supreme effort, stood still by his side, looking out over the congregation. He now observed an interesting trio approaching the platform, composed of his valued friend, Samuel Burnett — his fine face alight with his purpose — and two gray-bearded men of somewhat unpromising exterior, but plainly of prominence in the church, by the indefinable look of them. He watched the three climb the pulpit stairs, and come up to the figure in the chair — Sam, with tact, falling behind.

“You did well, Elder — you did well,” said George Tomlinson, struggling to express himself, and finding only this time-worn phrase. He stood awkwardly on one foot, before

Ebenezer Blake, like an embarrassed schoolboy, but his tone was sincere — and a trifle husky, on account of the untimely reappearance of the frog in his throat.

Elder Blake looked up — and William Sewall thought he had never seen a sweeter smile on a human face, young or old. “You are kind to come and tell me so, George,” said he. “I had thought never to preach again. It did me good.”

“It did us good, sir,” said Sam Burnett. He had waited an instant for Fraser to speak, but saw that the cold in the head was in the ascendancy again. “It did me so much good that I can hardly wait till I get back to town to hunt up a man I know, and tell him I think he was in the right in a little disagreement we had a good while ago. I’ve always been positive he was wrong. I suppose the facts in the case haven’t changed —” he smiled into the dim

blue eyes — “but somehow I seem to see them differently. It doesn’t look to me worth while to let them stand between us any longer.”

“Ah, it’s not worth while,” agreed the old man quickly. “It’s not worth while for any of us to be hard on one another, no matter what the facts. Life is pretty difficult, at its best — we can’t afford to make it more difficult for any human soul. Go back to town and make it right with your friend, Mr. Burnett. I take it he was your friend, or you wouldn’t think of him to-night.”

“Was — and is!” declared Sam, with conviction. “He’s got to be, whether he wants to or not. But he’ll want to — I know that well enough. We’ve been friends from boyhood — we’d just forgotten it, that’s all.”

There was a little pause. The old man sat with his white head leaning against the high back of his chair,

his face upturned, his eyes — with an appeal in them — resting first upon the face of Asa Fraser, then upon that of George Tomlinson. With a common impulse, William Sewall and Samuel Burnett moved aside together, turning their backs upon the three.

Asa Fraser lifted his eyes and met those of George Tomlinson. With a palpable effort — for he was a man of few words — he spoke.

“George,” said he, “I guess I made a mistake, thinking as I did.”

“Asey,” responded Tomlinson quickly, “I guess you weren’t the only one that’s made a mistake.” And he held out his hand.

Fraser grasped it. With his other hand he raised his handkerchief and blew his nose once more, violently — and finally. From this point the smile in his eyes usurped the place of the moisture which had bothered him so unwontedly, and put it quite to rout.

If you imagine that this little drama had escaped the attention of the departing congregation, headed the other way, you are much mistaken. The congregation was not headed the other way. From the moment when Burnett, Fraser and Tomlinson had started toward the pulpit, the congregation, to a man, had paused, and was staring directly toward them. It continued to stare, up to the moment when the handshaking took place. But then — eyes turned and met other eyes. Hearts beat fast, lips trembled, feet moved. Unquestionably something had happened to the people of North Estabrook.

Do you know how sometimes the ice goes out of a river? From shore to shore it has been frozen, cold and hard. For many months it has grown solid, deepening and thickening until it seems as if there could be no life left beneath. Then, at last, comes

sunshine and rain and warmth. The huge mass looks as impenetrable as ever, but all at once, some day — *crack!* — the first thin, dark line spreads across the surface. Then — *crack, crack!* — *crack, crack!* — in every direction the ice is breaking up. Look quickly, now, if you would see that frozen surface stretching seamless between shore and shore — for suddenly dark lanes of water open up, which widen while you watch — and soon, incredibly soon, the river has burst its bonds and is rushing freely once more between its banks, with only the ever-diminishing blocks of melting ice upon its surface to tell the story of its long imprisonment.

Even so, on that memorable Christmas night, did the ice in the North Estabrook church break up. *Crack!* — George Tomlinson and Asa Fraser, old friends but sworn foes, had shaken hands. *Crack!* Mrs. Tom-

linson and Mrs. Fraser, tears running frankly down their cheeks, had followed the example of their husbands — and glad enough to do it, for their homes lay side by side, and each had had a hard time of it getting along without the other. Miss Jane Pollock, seeing Mrs. Maria Hill's fruitless search for her handkerchief, had long since drawn out one of her own — she always carried two — and had held it in her hand, ready to offer it, if she could just get to the point. But when she saw, upon the pulpit platform, those two gripping hands, somehow she suddenly reached the point. *Crack!* — With no difficulty whatever Miss Pollock slipped the handkerchief into Mrs. Hill's hand, whispering commiseratingly: "I presume you've got one somewhere, Maria, but you just can't lay your hand on it. Don't take the trouble to return it — it isn't of any value."

And Mrs. Hill, accepting the hand-

kerchief, wiped away the unmanageable tears, and turning round answered fervently; "I guess I *will* return it, Jane, if it's only so's to come to your house again — if you'll let me in, after all I've said."

Even as they smiled, shamefacedly but happily, at each other, similar scenes were being enacted. All about them spread the breaking ice. Incredible, that it should happen in a night? Not so. The forces of Nature are mighty, but they are as weakness beside the spiritual forces of Nature's God.

XI

"Well, Billy Sewall, have you taken your young friend home and put him to bed?"

The questioner was Ralph Fernald, sitting with the rest of the family — or those members of it who were not

still attending to the wants of little children — before the fireplace, talking things over. They had been there for nearly an hour, since the service, but Sewall had only just come in.

“I’ve taken him home,” Sewall replied. “But there was no putting him to bed. I think he’ll sit up till morning—too happy to sleep, the fine old man.”

They had saved the big armchair for him, in the very centre of the circle, but he would have none of it. He went over to a corner of the inglenook, and dropped upon the floor at his sister Margaret’s feet, with his arm upon her knee. When somebody protested Guy interfered in his defence.

“Let him alone,” said he. “He gets enough of prominent positions. If he wants to sit on the fence and kick his heels a while, let him. He’s certainly earned the right to do as he

pleases to-night. By George! — talk about magnificent team-work! If ever I saw a sacrifice play I saw it to-night.”

Sewall shook his head. “You may have seen team-work,” said he, “though Mr. Blake was the most of the team. But there was no sacrifice play on my part. It was simply a matter of passing the ball to the man who could run. I should have been down in four yards — if I ever got away at all.”

John Fernald looked at his wife with a puzzled smile. “What sort o’ talk is that?” he queried. Then he went on: “I suppose you boys are giving the credit to Elder Blake — who ought to have it. But I give a good deal to William Sewall, whose eyes were sharp enough to see what we’ve been too blind to find out — that the old man was the one who could deal with us and make us see light on our quarrel. He did make

us see it! Here I've been standing off, pluming myself on being too wise to mix up in the fuss, when I ought to have been doing my best to bring folks together. What a difference it does make, the way you see a thing!"

He looked round upon the group, scanning one stirred face after another as the ruddy firelight illumined them. His glance finally rested on his daughter Nan. She too sat upon the floor, on a plump red cushion, with her back against her husband's knee. Somehow Nan and Sam were never far apart, at times like these. The youngest of the house of Fernald had made perhaps the happiest marriage of them all, and the knowledge of this gave her father and mother great satisfaction. The sight of the pair, returning his scrutiny, with bright faces, gave John Fernald his next comment.

"After the preachers, I guess

Nancy and Samuel deserve about the most credit," he went on. "It was the little girl's idea, and Sam stood by her, right through." He began to chuckle. "I can see Sam now, towing those two old fellows up to the pulpit. I don't believe they'd ever have got there without him. There certainly is a time when a man's hand on your arm makes it a good deal easier to go where you know you ought to go."

"It would have taken more than my hand to tow them away," said Sam Burnett, "after they found out how it felt to be friends again. Nobody could come between them now, with an axe."

"The music helped," cried Nan, "the music helped more than anything, except the sermon. Think how Margaret worked over that! — and Carolyn over that crazy little old organ! And Guy and Ed and Charles hung all those greens ——"

"I tacked the pulpit stair-carpet," put in Oliver, gravely. "While you're assigning credit, don't forget that."

"I stoked those stoves," asserted Ralph. "That left-hand one — Christopher! — I never saw a stove like that to hand out smoke in your face. But the church was warm when I got through with 'em."

"You all did wonderfully well," came Mother Fernald's proud and happy declaration.

"All but me," said a voice, from the centre of the group. It was a voice which nobody had ever expected to hear in an acknowledgment of failure of any sort whatsoever, and all ears listened in amazement.

"I did nothing but discourage everybody," went on the voice, not quite evenly. "I believe I'm apt to do that, though I never realized it before. But when that wonderful old man was speaking it came to me,

quite suddenly, that the reason my husband's family don't like me better — is — because — it is my nature always to see the objections to a thing, and to discourage people about it, if I can. I — want to tell you all that — I'm going to try to help, not hinder, from now on."

There was never a deeper sincerity than breathed in these astonishing words from Marian, Oliver's wife. Astonishing, because they all understood, knowing her as they did — Oliver was oldest, and had been first to marry — what a tremendous effort the little speech had cost her, a proud woman of the world, who had never seemed to care whether her husband's family loved her or not, so that they deferred to her.

For a moment they were all too surprised and touched — for there is nothing more touching than humility, where it is least expected — to speak. Then Ralph, who sat next Marian,

brought his fist down on his knee with a thud.

“Bully for you!” said he.

Upon Marian’s other side her husband’s mother slipped a warm, delicate hand into hers. Nan, leaning past Sam’s knee, reached up and patted her sister-in-law’s lap. Everybody else smiled, in his or her most friendly way, at Oliver’s wife; and Oliver himself, though he said nothing, and merely continued to stare fixedly into the fire, looked as if he would be willing to tack pulpit stair-carpets for a living, if it would help to bring about such results as these.

“Marian’s right in calling him a ‘wonderful old man.’” Guy spoke thoughtfully. “He got us all — Fernalds as well as Tomlinsons and Frasers. He hit me, square between the eyes, good and hard — but I’m glad he did,” he owned, with characteristic frankness.

They all sat gazing into the fire in

silence, for a little, after that, in the musing way of those who have much to think about. And by and by Father Fernald pulled out his watch and scanned it by the wavering light.

"Bless my soul!" he cried. "It's close on to twelve o'clock! "You children ought to be in bed — oughtn't they, Mother?"

There was a murmur of laughter round the group, for John Fernald was looking at his wife over his spectacles in just the quizzical way his sons and daughters well remembered.

"I suppose they ought, John," she responded, smiling at him. "But you might let them sit up a little longer — just this once."

He looked them over once more — it was the hundredth time his eyes had gone round the circle that night. It was a goodly array of manhood and womanhood for a father to look at and call his own — even William Sewall, the brother of his son's wife,

seemed to belong to him to-night. They gave him back his proud and tender glance, every one of them, and his heart was very full. As for their mother — but her eyes had gone down.

“Well,” he said, leaning over to clasp her hand in his own, as she sat next him, “I guess maybe, just this once, it won’t do any harm to let ’em stay up a little late. They’re getting pretty big, now. . . . And it’s Christmas Night.”





THE END

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